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# The Day of Judgment

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THERE WERE FEW Ethiopians in the town. Most remained in camps out towards the border. They were easy enough to spot, though, even among the polyglot locals. Folded like bats, they squatted on street corners, their eyes Byzantine, oblivious. Some had wares spread before them: kindling, sacking, or three tiny split tomatoes, from God knows where, sticking to a scrap of newspaper. Others simply waited for someone to give them something.

The surrounding waste permeated the town casually, giving its squat buildings a kind of archaeological clarity, though foot-scuffed dust obscured the pavement of the road from the bus stop all the way to the market. As the morning shade narrowed, so the morning crowd slowed its pace. By half past nine it had subsided to a shuffle, and so it was to remain for the rest of the day.

Within the market, respectable-looking merchants from the North conversed idly across the neat, narrow streets laid out by the colonial government. Cheerful calls in school-English followed me along: "Good morning." "Welcome, sir." "Come!" I gave in to an older man who had simply gestured to the chair next to him. He waved away the curious, who gathered when they saw that I could speak some Arabic, and we talked.

Next to the merchant's rounded, percussive speech my city tongue seemed alternately thuggish and over-refined. I told him of my surprise at the variety of the townsfolk and he smiled.

"Ah," he said, "we are a mixed people, from all corners of the continent."

Turning his chin, he placed a hand on his cheek. His dark olive skin had been cicatrized below his eyes. "See, I am white like you, because I am from Dongola. Look at them." Grinning, he nodded towards the street. Two giraffe-like youths passed in bounding lockstep. "They are of the Dinka tribe, so black we call them green. And Mustafa," he indicated the boy who had brought us tea, "he is from Zaire, where they eat human flesh."

We laughed at Mustafa's expense. The boy was bashful, but not unpleased.

The merchant became expansive. "Shilluk, Dinka, Kordofanis, Nuer, Eritreans, Egyptians, Moroccans. . . . We are all brothers here. No one is a stranger."

It was true. The town had an extraordinarily cosmopolitan air, with twenty different sorts of costume and as many radically varied physical types. People spoke all sorts of strange tongues. In regard to me, a white man, there was none of the half-degraded camaraderie I had met in Egypt. This town was at peace with itself.

"And what about the drought?" I asked, "Has it changed things very much?"

"Yes, of course. Three years with no rain—it is very bad for business. Farmers have left their land, slaughtered their herds, and there is no work in the town. There is no money." He paused, then shrugged. "And many many Ethiopians have come to take food from the foreigners."

"You have no problems with the refugees?"

"We are good people, pious and hospitable. We do not mind the refugees, except that some of their women are immoral. They are very poor. And so they sell anything they have. . . . Let me show you. Mustafa!" he shouted. "Go and bring the things from Ethiopia to show the foreigner."

We watched as the boy ran to the knife-and-scissors merchant across the street. He soon emerged carrying an oblong, cloth-covered bundle and brought it to our feet.

"My son-in-law bought these from Ethiopians last year," said the merchant. "They have none left to sell now."

With an elegant flick he revealed the prize: four long broadswords, beautifully tooled, of light gray metal. He handed me one, and I felt its weight. It would take two hands to wield, and considerable skill. These were the weapons, I knew, with which vast citizen armies had annihilated successive invaders in the last century.

I enquired the price. It was not high, but I didn't think of buying, and the merchant didn't press me.

"There is no power nor strength save in God."

He refolded the package. "It is true that we live in a difficult time, but you will see. You are a foreigner and a Christian, and you do not understand. When our Lord has finished with punishing the wicked who have brought this drought upon us, we will become prosperous and strong."

He spoke softly, with assurance. "It is the President and his clique who are the cause. They are selfish, evil men with the minds of dwarves. See what they have done to this country. They drive in big cars, but there is no gasoline for the people. Prices rise and our money becomes worthless. And then they beg foreign countries for food."

His analysis brooked no argument. With persistence I turned down his offer of lunch and made off. It was just time for the noon prayer. I was sorry to have depressed him.

I had been in the country for several days, but the heat still caught me out. Almost as soon as I left the shop I found myself looking for a place to sit. The crowd had dissipated into mosques and to the sides of the main road, across which I steered towards a public eating-place. A long trestle table extended out of its open front, partly shaded by a broken corrugated plastic awning. In its green light flies ambled about grease patches on the linoleum tablecloth. Slumping into a chair, I stared at them sympathetically. It was too hot to fly.

The proprietor stirred from beside his radio and hovered by me long enough to find that I would have food as well as drink. The food was meat, he said. It came from a hole in the back wall, on a plastic plate, and was joined by a dollop of tomatoes from a plastic tub on the counter and a loaf of bread. The bread was rough, the tomatoes acrid. The meat had to be coaxed, with sucking and gnawing, off chips of bone and gristle. My appetite was fading quickly, so I let my thoughts wander to the day before.

The journey from the capital had been a long one. The bus had stumbled out of the station—or, more accurately, the transport bazaar—in the early morning. In six hours we stopped only twice, first for a bowl of beans at a roadside food line and later to change a tire, which had probably just wilted on the hot, rough asphalt. The second time, we had filed down from the curtained interior of the bus, with its comforting rumble and buzz of talk, into an utterly desolate plain. The white light of noon erased all color. The road itself seemed bleached. The passengers, mostly families with beautifully dressed, well-behaved children, wandered about in the dust for a time before clustering in silence in the meter of shade provided by the bus. Some soldiers in odd-fitting greens with laceless boots did the

work, communicating in grunts. They were blessedly efficient, as if in response to our anxiety.

I put away my book and for the rest of the journey kept an eye on a sliver of window unshrouded by the curtain. It was cool enough inside; an attendant passed up and down the aisle with a bucket of ice water and a plastic drinking cup—enough to stoke a continuous, cooling sweat without dehydration. And there was music, whiny and rhythmic, Afro-Chinese, which seemed to give our motion a sense of purpose. But outside was nothing but bleakness, thousands of square miles of cracked dust, flat, gray and featureless except for a few meager eroded mesas. It was astonishing. All this had been pasture and maize fields only two years before.

Once we passed a cluster of round mud huts thatched with brush. ("Africa," I thought, recognizing the same sensation I had been given by the rich and dusky air at Khartoum Airport the night of my arrival from the north.) The huts were set back, as if unaware of the road. But they were derelict now—spent fires in a dead land.

Pushing my plate aside, I turned to call for a soft drink: I needed the sugar. When I turned back, two men who had sat noiselessly beside me were picking through the remains of my dish. I told them to help themselves, but they didn't seem to want to hear. They ate without haste.

Later, in the hotel, I woke up sweating, and stumbled down to the tank in the courtyard to fill my bucket. Other guests were making their ablutions for the *'asr* prayer, but I headed to the shower room for a more complete dousing.

Afterwards, somewhat revived, I set out to track down a man called Saddiq. His name had been given me by an acquaintance in the capital, an Englishman who had, in effect, wedded himself to Africa.

I soon found Saddiq, asleep in his room above a café. His door, one of several off a narrow corridor, was open, and I walked right in. Before I could think of some way of rousing him discreetly, Saddiq had opened his eyes. We shook hands and exchanged courtesies, both of us smiling. He was pleased to hear news of our mutual friend, who had, I gathered, something of a reputation. I had hardly sat down—on the only chair—before Saddiq brought out a tin box with a cone of pressed marijuana and papers.

Saddiq lived alone, unmarried and unshaven, in this room. Scraps lit-

tered the floor and dust banked on the uneven wall, where some of the t-shirts he printed for a living were pinned up. His main client, it seemed, was the Eritrean People's Liberation Front; their shirts showed a pink clenched fist holding a Kalashnikov, with "Eritrea" in green. The only real decor was a printed velveteen wall-hanging, which caught my eye. Framed by an arabesque, seven dogs of differing breeds sat around a card table playing poker; one of them, a bulldog with a cigar, held the ace of spades under the table with his hind paw, cheating, while an aproned poodle brought drinks from the bar. I admired it and Saddiq gave it to me. There was no refusing.

A touch of self-deprecatory humor inflected the brightness of his desert eyes as Saddiq talked. He was originally from Chad, but had wandered over to the Sudan in his teens. He had seen Khartoum and even been to Cairo. The Egyptians' morals, he said, were as vulgar as their speech. I laughed, apologizing for my own accent, and for a moment he looked truly anxious lest I should take offense.

My Arabic was less acute than I would have liked, and in the smoky room volition swayed an already tractable understanding. As often happens in foreign places between foreign people, our talk had a sympathetic bent. The great issues of the world, which were what we talked about, seemed sharper here, where there was no resonance. East and West were far away, pushy, conceited and ultimately as alike as, say, the Jesuits and the Franciscans. Beside the credulous and dignified ethics of this town, exiled by nature from its own hinterland, the warring world at large was vanity. There, they doubted even themselves. Here, where all life was tenuous, was the security of faith.

Saddiq had brought our conversation to Islam. Now he learned that I was not a Muslim. But I was open-minded, and, since for the Muslim there is no greater credit than to win a fresh convert, it didn't surprise me that Saddiq should take it upon himself to expound on his religion. So he tried me with some of the proofs of God used on these occasions.

Was it not true that Science had not discovered that the Earth is not perfectly round, but elongated, until Yuri Gagarin had gone into orbit and seen the planet from up above? But Islam had known this all along; in the Qur'an, God the Most High mentions Creation and Its Egg.

Did I not know that when the American space pilot Armstrong set his

foot on the moon, he had heard strange words? And that only later, on a visit to a Muslim country, had he recognized them as coming from the call to prayer: "La ilaha ill'Allah?" Did I not know that Armstrong had surrendered himself to God at once?

And did I not see how Muslims were as brothers to one another, while Christians fought hideous World Wars? Had I seen hospitality and good intentions in any place as much as in the Sudan?

I had not, and my patience for argument had vanished. As Saddiq continued, invoking creation, light, water, the stars, and all the Signs of God, my attention wandered. It struck me that here—where a speck of green had eloquence and where man in his bareness demanded an answering voice of stern polemical force—here was a heavenly city, a *Madinah.* Here the lunar calendar of Islam, in which month disregarded season, setting human endeavor on an arbitrary plane, was perfect.

Saddiq called me back from my reverie. "So how can you say that there is more than one God?"

"Verily," I replied, "I cannot."

He leaned forward eagerly. "And do you attest that Muhammad is God's prophet?"

I tried to soften his enthusiasm: "I think that he was a sincere prophet."

"And do you believe in the Day of Judgment?"

"Ah," I said, "that is where I begin to be unsure."

Saddiq's face fell.

I took this opportunity to change the subject, and shortly Saddiq suggested that we go out for the sunset. Had I seen the view from the roof of the hotel? It was the best in town.

Outside, a light breeze dampened the heat and sent papers scudding across the road. The hotel was a three-storied structure that had once been painted. Its monolithic façade almost overwhelmed the entrance, which was low and black and was reached by a flight of uneven stairs. At the top sat the proprietor, holding a newspaper very close to his good eye. He grunted in response to Saddiq's salaam.

More stairs led from the courtyard to the roof, which was flat and bare. Around us spread the town, with, according to a guidebook, 50,000 inhabitants; the center of an important agricultural region, where extensive herds were kept. There were now said to be three, four, or even five

times as many people here and not one cow.

The town sprawled low on the plain. In the center, where we stood, were a few concrete buildings and some paved roads. The houses further out were mostly round and thatched, arranged in family compounds enclosed by walls. A few dusty trees swayed here and there, and at the northern edge of the town, a mile or so away, a ten-ton truck bumped along a track. Beyond was nothing at all, just brown haze, thickening to the south, where the refugee camps lay and the dust had risen, blanketing the horizon.

Saddiq pivoted slowly, detached as he named the different districts. He said that the rich people and foreign aid workers lived in a street on the far side of the market. Many of them had running water. A few lights strung along the street went on while we watched, and Saddiq explained that the generator worked for two or three hours every evening.

Sighing, he accepted my cigarette and sat beside me on the roof's edge. I watched his eyes darken as he bent over my match.

"This is a tired country," he said. "A very tired country. Look how there are no cars. That is because there is no fuel, so the drivers stay at home, like the farmers whose land is dry. You should have seen this town before the government became corrupt. We had electricity for most of the night. And discothèques. All that has befallen us is the fault of the President and his school of sycophants. They take all for themselves and leave the people hungry. God will punish them."

"Perhaps it will be so." I hesitated. "But it seems to me that God is punishing the poor more than the politicians."

Saddiq's reply was stiff: "The poor do not suffer. They do not suffer because they believe in the Day. It is not they who have something to lose."

Even as he spoke, a whiff of something like pure ozone gusted my way. I gasped: "Rain! It's raining."

So light they scarcely stained the dust, drops began to fall. Behind Saddiq sheet lightning flared. I stared at his face, which was blank.

"Ah," he said, and that was all.

"But it hasn't rained for two years," I insisted.

Saddiq looked at me curiously. "Of course," he said, "Our Lord is generous."

In the street nothing was happening. The town was silent. A few customers moved into the interior of a café. Directly below, the owner of the hotel read on, shaking out the paper with a smack as he turned a page. For me, after only a day in this stifling place, the rain was miraculous. But the townsfolk, it seemed, were indifferent.

The rain intensified briefly, then faded. Across the street a loudspeaker hawked jarringly. It was sunset; time for prayers.

We met again, half an hour later, at the café. I had long since put down the smudgy morning paper, with its Pharaonic spread of presidential doings, when Saddiq emerged from the crowd at the mosque door. He looked distracted as he sat down beside me. Our conversation was half-hearted. Finally, he interrupted me in mid-sentence to say that he wanted to introduce me to a friend of his, a brilliant *imam* who gave the sermons at the mosque. I agreed to go. My pride, perhaps, wouldn't allow this presumed interest in matters of faith the ephemerality of mere tourism.

We did not walk far, only to a vacant lot on the far side of the mosque. There a circle of men squatted around a pressure lamp, which grew brighter as the dusk deepened. Introductions were made—I was the foreign brother from Cairo, Saddiq said. Faces nodded back.

I recognized the *imam.* His *jibba* was longer and whiter than the others, his eyes sharper. His name was Sheikh Mahjoub, Saddiq told me. He was pleased to meet strangers, and particularly those who sought guidance.

The sheikh smiled slightly, and proceeded to question me. He was surprisingly young, his untrimmed beard only two fingers in length. This he stroked from time to time as he spoke, staring fixedly, like the very poor in old photographs.

With me he used the classical language, which I found annoying because it imposed an unnecessary level of foreignness. It impressed our audience, though, and I could sense their indifference turning to disapproval as my impatience with the sheikh grew evident.

My credentials were probed first: How old was I? Was I married? Why not? My nationality? Did I have brothers and sisters? Was my father a Christian? How much did the plane ticket from Cairo cost?

This last question and its sequel—Why had I come?—drew unpopular answers. The atmosphere began to oppress me. Sheikh Mahjoub rocked on his heels and his companions stared at the ground.

Saddiq took notice of my discomfort and spoke. "The foreign brother has testified to me that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God." His tone sought approval.

"That is good," said the sheikh, looking genuinely pleased.

Saddiq continued, "But he says he does not understand the Day of Judgment."

Several faces looked up, perplexed.

"Ah," the sheikh said, "I will tell you." His eyes lost focus. "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate," he mumbled. Then he drew a deep breath. A tremolo incantation ensued:

"On the Day of Judgment the sky will seethe like molten brass, and will be cleft asunder. The stars and oceans will be scattered, the mountains flattened, and the earth turned to powder. On that day there will be a deafening noise, trumpets will waken you, and the angels will descend. On the Day of Judgment there will be no protection for the wicked and ungrateful, no defense for those who took faith to be amusement and were deceived by the life of the world. On the Day such will descend to Hell, to the bottomless hole, to the fire blast which heaves in its breath and bursts with fury. Their hoards and arrogant ways will serve for nothing, for on the Day of Judgment sinners will be known by the marks which they cannot hide. Their tongues will hang out like the tongues of dogs as they face the boiling. Death will come, but they will not die.

"And on the Day of Judgment justice will be done and the righteous will be rewarded and there will be felicity for the servants of God. On the Day, believers and the long-suffering will be recompensed in full and raised up to the height of the Lord Most High and seated on soft couches, and clothed in gowns of green silk, and served cool drink, attended by youths pure as pearls. They will enter a garden, a garden of eternal coolness and shade, and rejoice in peace and eternity."

As if breaking a trance, Sheikh Mahjoub dropped the right hand which we had all watched rise higher and higher, then turned his palms upward, tilted his head back and muttered a prayer. The others echoed him.

Somehow during this speech a large enamelled bowl had appeared in the center of the circle. Newspaper was spread before us, and bread passed around. No one spoke as we scooped the mash of beans and white cheese with bread strips. Each finished at his own pace, then got up to rinse his

mouth at the mosque's outdoor faucet.

Saddiq nudged me. "Do you understand now?"

What could I say? Sheikh Mahjoub's rain of words had left me dry as chalk. "Oh, yes. He is a most learned man, the sheikh."

We stayed a bit longer, enough for the meeting to become lively again and for Saddiq to ask a question. Was it true that there was a Saying of the prophet which said that a man must die before he dies?

"Yes," said the sheikh, "this is a Saying of the Messenger of God, peace and prayers upon him be. What he meant is that we must surrender ourselves and be prepared for Him to receive us at any moment."

And again his eyes faded, and the timbre of his voice sharpened. "We must be as the hawk in the sky who plunges for his prey. He has waited for days, but when he sees his quarry he swoops, plunging to the ground as in death. We must be as the hawk at this moment of near-death. And die before we die."

With luck, and despite Saddiq's protests, I managed to find a place on the following day's bus. Saddiq insisted that I accept as a present a copy of a book called *Facing the Day of Judgment,* written by a professor at Al Azhar Islamic University in Cairo. The cover showed a face like the one in Munch's "Scream." I kept the curtain next to my seat drawn on the way back to the capital and finished *Madame Bovary.* I had been glad to leave. The town was complete enough without me, a stranger.

When I left the country a few days later, rioters were marching in the capital. I was lucky to find the airport open. Only hours after my flight, the President also flew to Egypt, and into exile. And many months, perhaps even a year later, I met an American academic, an old hand in the Middle East, who wore short-sleeved linen suits and had just come from the same town near the Ethiopian border. The corn for miles around, he said, was as high as a man. Now the problem was that farmers could not sell what they grew, because they were competing with foreign aid.